



Candida Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York: HarperOne), 2013.

Moss offers here a well written, honest, forthright examination of early Christianity and its martyrs. In eight chapters:

- 1- Martyrdom Before Christianity
- 2- Christian Borrowing of Jewish and Pagan Martyrdom Traditions
- 3- Inventing Martyrs in Early Christianity
- 4- How Persecuted Were the Early Christians?
- 5- Why Did the Romans Dislike Christians?
- 6- Myths About Martyrs
- 7- The Invention of the Persecuted Church
- 8- The Dangerous Legacy of a Martyrdom Complex

Additionally, there are also copious endnotes and an index as well, of course, as an introduction.

Readers will be drawn to Moss's lucid writing style and they will enjoy her telling of the tale. Many, however, will not like the facts presented or the conclusions drawn because they are the facts and conclusions of an iconoclast. Moss here smashes idols in – literally – the same way that the 16<sup>th</sup> century radical reformers pillaged churches and destroyed images- sweeping clean their churches of all vestiges of the violation of the First Commandment.

Nonetheless, whether liked or not, Moss does present the facts, quite fearlessly, as she, page after page, exposes the cause and effect of martyr making amongst the early believers. She also, though, does something else: she shows, quite convincingly, that the reason the stories of the martyrs are told and retold has less to do with them and more to

do with their admirers. Martyr stories serve a contemporary purpose. Whether that purpose was the denunciation of the Harlot Rome of John Foxe, or Rick Santorum's denunciation of those ideologically different, appeal to martyrs occurs. And so does the notion of persecution.

Not that Moss would have us believe that there were no martyrs and there was no persecution among early Christians. She's too good a historian to fall into that 'mythicist' trap. There were martyrs- we just don't, and can't, know anything about them. And there was persecution, but it was hardly the widespread bloodbath that many have in mind when they hear the word. She observes

The idea of a persecuted church comes predominantly from authors who were writing after the reign of Constantine had begun and in some cases after his death. Although there were other historians and church thinkers, Eusebius has uniquely shaped the way that people tell the story of Christianity. Eusebius helped to make the history of Christianity the history of persecution (pp. 244-245).

But why? To what end?

The result is that we are farther and farther removed from the historical martyrs. What remains is a narrative of persecution and suffering developed to justify and support the institutions of orthodoxy (p. 245).

If I may put it in my own words- what happened to early Christian martyrs is the same thing that happens over and over: someone dies and they're turned into a hero in support of a cause. Ryan White died of AIDS and became, after his death, a hero and a rallying point for the furtherance of AIDS research. Pat Tillman died (by friendly fire) and was turned into a hero of the American forces in Afghanistan, to further the cause of the war in that place. And on and on it goes. The early Christian martyrs served the same purpose in the minds of their 'hero-izers'.

Heroes are made, not born (or martyred). And they're made for a grander purpose. They are tools in the furtherance of a cause- little more. In the case of the Church, the martyrs served to further the cause of piety and obedience, thus reinforcing the power of the institution whilst simultaneously urging others to be willing to sacrifice themselves for 'the cause', like Jesus and Paul and Perpetua and Polycarp had.

Moss's volume is must reading for those interested in the history of early Christianity; and for those wishing to understand the language of 'persecution' bantered around today in so many contexts for so many causes. Indeed, it is one of those books worth reading twice or three times. Once won't be enough.

Pick up your copy of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* and toss it in the rubbish heap. He's wrong. He's misleading. Replace it with this honest and truly brilliant examination of the subject and you'll learn, you'll actually learn a great deal- about our times as well as earlier.

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